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Children Should Be Begotten and Not Made

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COMMENTARY

Children should be begotten, not made

BY FATHER NICANOR AUSTRIACO, O.P.

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On January 26, 2009, Nadya Suleman, a single mom living with her parents in Whittier, CA, gave birth to eight babies, six boys and two girls, nine weeks premature at the Kaiser Permanente Bellflower Medical Center.

It appears that the octuplets were conceived in the laboratory using in vitro fertilization (IVF) to fertilize their mother's eggs with a donor's sperm in a test tube. This extraordinary birth has sparked a moral controversy. Many people, including many Catholics, are asking for ethical guidelines to regulate the artificial reproductive technologies (ART) currently used to help women to conceive. However, despite their moral concerns, they are often surprised to learn that the Catholic Church has condemned IVF and its associated technologies as immoral practices that undermine the dignity of the human person. When I was a hospital chaplain, I was often asked the question: How can the Church be against a medical innovation that has brought so much joy and happiness to infertile couples and their families?

To explain, I begin by acknowledging that the desire for children is natural and fulfilling of marriage. It is a great good. Thus, it is not surprising that infertility causes much suffering. It is a great cross. However, though the desire for a child is a good one, not every means of fulfilling that desire is necessarily good. Clearly, for instance, it would be wrong for an infertile couple to kidnap a newborn baby girl to fulfill their dreams of increasing the size of their family. How then are we to evaluate the morality of the different technologies that are available to help a woman to conceive a child?

The Church proposes the following principle to guide us in this task: A medical intervention that leads to the conception of a child is good if it respects the covenant of marriage and the dignity of the baby.

First, infertility treatment has to respect the covenant of marriage. When a couple enters into a marriage covenant they promise that they will only become parents with and through each other. This promise is expressed every time they make love. Thus, it is fitting and proper that the origin of human life has its authentic context in marriage and in the family where it is generated through an act that expresses the reciprocal love between a man and a woman (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Personae*, no. 6). In other words, the conception of new life takes place morally only as a direct act of marital intercourse. Infertility treatments need to respect this moral order. Those medical interventions that restore a couple's fertility allowing them to conceive when they make love are good. In contrast, those that simply circumvent the conjugal act, those means that allow a husband and a wife to become parents other than by each other, are not good. A child should be conceived through the loving embrace of his father and his mother and not through the medical expertise of a lab technician. To put it another way, a child should be begotten and not made. Second, infertility treatment has to respect the dignity of child. A child is a person and as such can never be

treated as an object or a product. By their very nature, IVF and its associated technologies reduce the child to an object of market exchange, something manufactured, sold and bought. Therefore, for both these reasons, IVF is immoral and is justly condemned by the Church.

Finally, I often hear two objections to the Church's teaching. First, some argue that an infertile couple has a right to use IVF because they have a right to a child. This is not true. A couple does not have a right to a child because a child is a person, and one cannot have a right to another person. Can a man claim that he has a right to a wife, or a woman a right to a husband? Second, others argue that it is false to claim that a child conceived in the test tube cannot be the fruit of his parents' love since it is love that motivates the parents' desire for a baby. However, when parents choose to conceive their child with IVF, they inevitably allow others to treat their child as an object who is created in a lab. Thus, regardless of their intentions, parents who use IVF are allowing others to undermine their child's dignity. This is not love.

Father Nicanor Austriaco, O.P., is an assistant professor of biology and an instructor of theology at Providence College. He also serves as a staff ethicist at the Dominican Friars Health Care Ministry of New York, NY, and an advisor to Rhode Island Right to Life.